



# **BREAKING THROUGH THE DISTANCE:**

## **HOW RELATIONSHIPS FOSTER ONLINE LEARNING**



**INSIGHTS FROM BREAKTHROUGH COLLABORATIVE'S  
NATIONAL 2020 VIRTUAL SUMMER PROGRAM**

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## OUR MISSION

**Breakthrough Collaborative works with highly motivated, traditionally underrepresented students to achieve post-secondary success and empowers aspiring leaders to become the next generation of educators and advocates.**



BREAKTHROUGH KENT DENVER



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**WE ARE GRATEFUL FOR THE SUPPORT AND COMMITMENT OF THE MANY INDIVIDUALS AND INSTITUTIONS WHO MADE THIS SUMMER POSSIBLE FOR BREAKTHROUGH, AND WHO CONTRIBUTED TO THE REVIEW OF THIS RESEARCH.**

Special thanks to the dozens of executive directors, program staff, students, parents, teaching fellows, and instructional coaches who participated in this report, and to thousands more whose Breakthrough spirit and commitment generated the success story behind it.

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**In the spring of 2020, in response to COVID-19, Breakthrough Collaborative mounted an unprecedented, network-wide effort to develop a virtual ecosystem. The aim was to deliver a replica of its in-person summer program of academic and social-emotional support to thousands of students at its 24 affiliates across the country.**

The staff faced two significant challenges: the first was the prevailing wisdom that meaningful relationships between educators and students — the hallmark of the Breakthrough culture — could not be translated to an online platform. The second challenge related to capacity: the feasibility of launching an entire digital ecosystem in two months. Once underway, it became increasingly clear to both national and affiliate leaders that community-building, teaching, and learning can be successful online with the right resources and planning.

This report, the first in a series that will share findings from Breakthrough's summer experiences, focuses on **six strategies to best engage students during virtual learning**. A second paper focused on mobilizing college-age teaching fellows, a key success factor in student learning, will follow.

Data in this paper are primarily sourced from interviews, focus groups, and surveys from students, teachers, and affiliate leaders conducted in August and September 2020. We hope the learnings chronicled in this paper provide useful examples that can be employed by schools and other programs.

The Collaborative owes its summer success to its coast-to-coast network of professional staff who endeavored to embody the ethos and culture that Breakthrough fosters in its students and teaching fellows. This includes three key traits: maintain positive attitudes; hold staff and students to high expectations; and weave community-building into all aspects of planning, learning, and programming.

The COVID-19 Pandemic Summer was the most profound moment of collaboration in the organization's history. Many affiliates reported that they learned new strategies that they plan to keep using even when they return to in-person programming. Several executive directors plan to use the now-familiar virtual tools to deepen existing supports for students and families throughout the school year, and all finished the summer with a renewed confidence in the strength of the Breakthrough model.



BREAKTHROUGH COAST TO COAST DAY PANEL

## SIX STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESSFUL ONLINE STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

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### STRATEGY 1:

#### **BELIEVE THAT ONLINE LEARNING IS POSSIBLE.**

- Hold positive mindsets and high expectations.

### STRATEGY 2:

#### **BE FLEXIBLE IN TRANSLATING PROGRAMS TO ONLINE FORMATS.**

- Redesign programming while staying true to program goals.
- Reassess and adjust continually based on feedback from students and staff.

### STRATEGY 3:

#### **CREATE SAFE SPACES IN SMALL AND LARGE GROUPS TO BUILD RELATIONSHIPS.**

- Cultivate belonging through small and large group community-building opportunities.
- Create safe spaces to allow for meaningful learning.
- Build connections in the “off” times.

### STRATEGY 4:

#### **PRIORITIZE CONNECTIONS WITH FAMILIES.**

- Ask for regular feedback from families.
- Share highlights and challenges with families in a student-centered way.
- Offer regular and accessible family events.

### STRATEGY 5:

#### **DEFINE AND COMMUNICATE EXPECTATIONS FOR ONLINE PARTICIPATION.**

- Set clear digital expectations and norms through technology trainings.
- Rely on multiple indications of online student engagement.

### STRATEGY 6:

#### **IMMERSE STUDENTS IN REAL-WORLD CONTENT THAT IS RELEVANT AND FUN.**

- Infuse social justice and real-world examples throughout the program.
- Keep learning fun and joyous.

## KEY FINDINGS

The experiences of Breakthrough Collaborative's affiliates during the summer of 2020 demonstrate that with focused planning and continuous stakeholder input, traditionally in-person activities — even those highly dependent on human connections — can be transformed into meaningful virtual experiences for middle and high school students. Breakthrough teaching staff used a variety of strategies to reimagine the Breakthrough summer learning program and offer the following transferable “lessons learned” to other educators:

### STRATEGY 1:

#### **BELIEVE THAT ONLINE LEARNING IS POSSIBLE.**

Success in online learning starts with high expectations on the part of administrators and teachers — expectations that staff can be effective teachers in a virtual setting, and expectations that students will rise to the challenge, engage, and learn despite the new format.

### STRATEGY 2:

#### **BE FLEXIBLE IN TRANSLATING PROGRAMS TO ONLINE FORMATS.**

Reinventing in-person programming for an online setting requires creativity and flexibility. In adjusting the program's format, Breakthrough staff members were open to all possible changes including altering time devoted to material, swapping or modifying staff roles, and adjusting the curriculum from subject-specific to project-based learning. Redesigning for online learning is not a “once and done” exercise. Programs were continuously reassessed throughout the summer as staff members solicited feedback from students, colleagues, and families, and made adjustments to class schedules and activities as needed.

### STRATEGY 3:

#### **CREATE SAFE SPACES IN SMALL AND LARGE GROUPS TO BUILD RELATIONSHIPS.**

Breakthrough teachers placed community-building at the heart of the redesigned curriculum, believing that relationships, fun, and meaningful content need to go hand-in-hand to deepen engagement and optimize learning. Strong relationships among students and teachers emerged when staff intentionally created safe spaces for students to participate, i.e., environments in which students felt comfortable being themselves and sharing freely. Affiliates found that whole community gatherings played an important part, complementing the smaller group settings.

### STRATEGY 4:

#### **PRIORITIZE CONNECTIONS WITH FAMILIES.**

The COVID-19 crisis drove the expansion of family involvement. Staff constantly communicated and surveyed to assess needs and provide support, in areas that ranged from technology access to grocery cards. Families proved to be willing partners and allies in supporting student engagement, not just when students fell short of program expectations, but around student successes. Furthermore, offering parents remote gathering opportunities increased family participation rates in coffee chats and end-of-year celebrations.

**STRATEGY 5:****DEFINE AND COMMUNICATE EXPECTATIONS FOR ONLINE PARTICIPATION.**

Breakthrough staff incorporated multiple strategies to provide technology support, including limiting the number of platforms used and providing orientations and demonstrations to both students and families. Breakthrough student schedules also limited the number of consecutive live meetings, often providing breaks after every 45 to 60 minutes. In response to some students' unwillingness or inability to appear on camera, staff members learned to use multiple indicators of engagement, such as participating in chat boxes and real-time apps, completing homework assignments, and accessing materials in the evening.

**STRATEGY 6:****IMMERSE STUDENTS IN REAL-WORLD CONTENT THAT IS RELEVANT AND FUN.**

A high-energy, fun-filled learning environment is a signature of Breakthrough's in-person program, and a key ingredient to maintaining engaging online programming. The more that Breakthrough staff infused joy into activities, found ways to make students smile, and connected lessons to what was happening in the world, the deeper student engagement became. Given the national context, affiliates found that a social justice curriculum and real-world course content especially resonated with students and teachers. Affiliates translated into an online setting the same kinds of challenges, spirit days, and celebrations, hallmarks of a traditional Breakthrough summer.

**Breakthrough Collaborative prepares highly motivated, traditionally underrepresented students to achieve post-secondary success through consecutive summer learning experiences that start in middle school, with typically a six-year commitment or longer.**

The Collaborative operates as [two dozen community-based affiliates](#) supported by a national office. Each affiliate creates a supportive learning community in which local students are prepared academically by college students and experienced professional staff. In a typical year, college-age teachers, referred to as teaching fellows, are recruited from more than 250 colleges and universities, and lead in-person instructional programs during the summer months along with out-of-school-time enrichment throughout the school year. They are supported and developed by instructional coaches, who are experienced K-12 teachers from local schools.

The Breakthrough summer experience is more than an academically rigorous learning experience; students and staff collectively build a community with a culture centered on connection, empowerment, and fun that students cherish year after year.

**Over the past decade, Breakthrough has served 18,000 K-12 students and trained 8,700 teaching fellows.** Breakthrough students are diverse: 96 percent identify as a person of color, and 77 percent receive free- or reduced price-lunch subsidies. Students who participate in Breakthrough are 50 percent more likely to directly enroll in a four-year college or university than high school graduates nationwide, regardless of socio-economic background.<sup>1</sup> Three-quarters (75%) of Breakthrough students are the first in their families to go to college. Once they enroll, they graduate at the same rate as their high-income peers.<sup>2</sup>

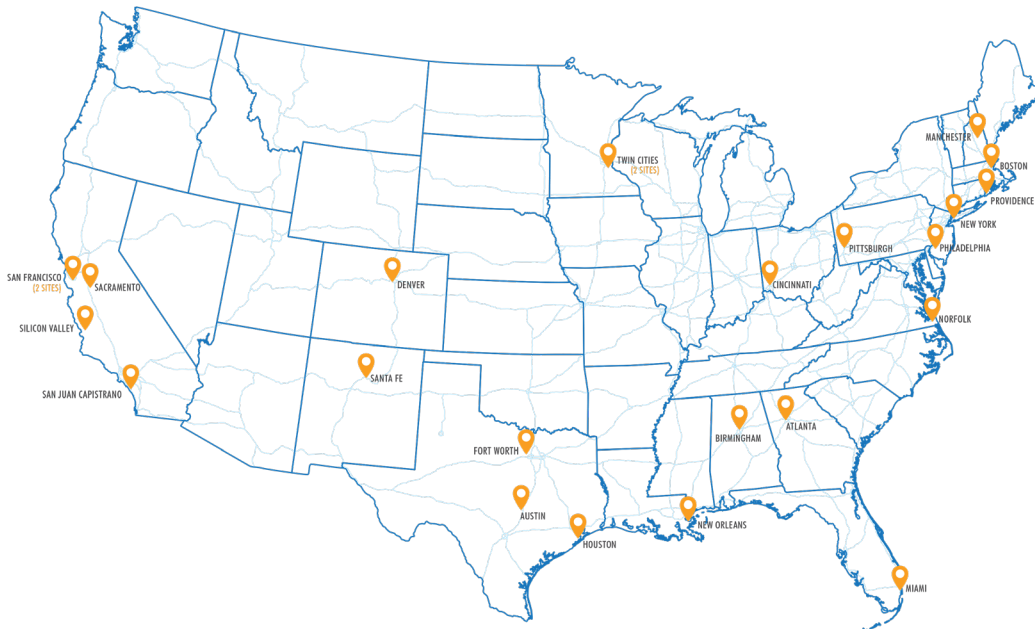
Breakthrough teachers, known as teaching fellows, also come from diverse backgrounds: 76 percent identify as a person of color, 49 percent demonstrate financial need, and 47 percent are the first member of their families to attend college. Three-quarters of teaching fellow alumni pursue careers in education, as classroom teachers or other leadership roles.<sup>3</sup> Breakthrough is the largest pre-professional teacher training program in the nation, preparing undergraduates from all majors for careers in the classroom.

**With more than four decades of success in closing the opportunity gap for under-resourced students, Breakthrough is a national leader in educational equity.**



BREAKTHROUGH ATLANTA

FIGURE 1.  
BREAKTHROUGH COLLABORATIVE AFFILIATES AND PARTICIPANTS



### 2020 TEACHING FELLOWS

76% identify as a person of color  
49% demonstrate financial need  
47% are the first in their family to attend college

### 2020 STUDENTS

96% identify as a person of color  
77% receive free or reduced-price lunch subsidies  
75% are the first in their family to attend college



BREAKTHROUGH MANCHESTER

This report is the first in a series of white papers produced by the [Breakthrough Collaborative](#) intended to share insights gained from its summer 2020 experience in translating a long-standing, evidence-based, in-person summer academy for middle- and high-school students to virtual programming at 23 of its 24 affiliate sites across the country.<sup>4</sup> This report, centered on student engagement, describes how Breakthrough built an online community of students, families, and teachers that fostered interpersonal connections, facilitated student learning, and renewed participants' optimism in the face of both the COVID-19 pandemic and social unrest due to continued racial injustices.

In consideration of the breadth, timeliness, and relatability of the lessons learned this past summer, Breakthrough Collaborative has undertaken this research project to gather **successful strategies and best-practice examples for engaging students in virtual learning**. From a variety of data sources (see below), we identify **six strategies to foster successful student engagement in an online summer learning experience**, with success defined as students reporting knowledge gains, feeling connected, and “showing up” — attending classes, completing academic work as required, and being active members of online communities.<sup>5</sup>

### DATA SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY

This study is a descriptive analysis of experiences and outcomes as reported by participants through multiple data sources. Surveys of students and teaching fellows collected data on participants' experiences, self-efficacy, feelings of belonging and preparedness, and perceptions of program benefit. An affiliate survey collected data on schedules, grades served, curriculum, and support. Interviews were also conducted with **executive directors (ED)** and **program directors (PD)** from almost all affiliates, and focus groups were conducted with a handful of parents, students, **teaching fellows (TFs)** and **instructional coaches (ICs)** to provide additional qualitative data. Data sources include the following:

- **Affiliate Survey:** 22 responses, 96% response rate.
- **Post-Summer Survey of Teaching Fellows:** 650 respondents, 92% response rate.
- **Pre-Summer Survey of Students:** 3,196 respondents, 62% response rate.
- **Post-Summer Survey of Students:** 2,489 respondents, 48% response rate.
- **Executive Director Interviews:** 19 respondents from 19 affiliates, 83% of affiliates represented.
- **Program Director Interviews:** 30 respondents from 21 affiliates, 91% of affiliates represented.
- **Focus Groups with Parents, Students, Teaching Fellows and Instructional Coaches:**  
5 sessions held with a total of 20 participants.

*Additional details on the data sources and methodology can be found in Appendix I of this report.*

## NATIONAL CONTEXT AND CHALLENGE

In January 2020, the COVID-19 health pandemic struck the United States. By March, in response to rising rates of infection, workplaces across the nation shut down and citizens were told to stay home. Following suit, schools across the nation closed and sent students home. Most schools remained closed the remainder of the school year and switched to virtual learning.<sup>6</sup>

School districts and teachers scrambled to meet the unprecedented challenge of pivoting to online instruction with determination and creativity. Within weeks, districts restructured entire curricula for virtual instruction, learned new online platforms, and became technology instructors for students in Kindergarten through 12th grade. Despite these efforts, not all schools were equally equipped with the expertise or resources required to meet the moment. Student engagement in online learning varied considerably, as students coped with chaos in their home environments. Many students' parents lost their jobs, as the national unemployment rate rose to 14 percent by April.<sup>7</sup> Unemployed families faced food insecurity and loss of housing. Working parents struggled to balance new childcare responsibilities with schools and daycare centers closed.

Hardest hit were students from under-resourced communities, especially lower-income, Black, and Latinx students.<sup>8</sup> One study found that 59 percent of children of lower-income parents faced obstacles to virtual learning, compared with only 13 percent of upper-income children.<sup>9</sup> Learning gaps deepened, as some wealthier parents hired private tutors while economically disadvantaged families had far fewer options to sustain learning, exacerbated for many by lack of access to technology and the internet.<sup>10</sup> Researchers estimate that as a result of COVID-19 shutdowns, Black students may lose 10 months of learning and low-income students may lose more than a year, compared to 6 months for white students.<sup>11</sup>

By the end of the school year, teachers, students, and parents were exhausted from the effort of inventing new lessons, troubleshooting technological glitches, and juggling work schedules. Adding emotional pain to mental distress were a series of racially-charged events that laid bare ongoing injustice and abuse, including the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, that catalyzed civil disturbances across the nation. Black Lives Matter demonstrations broke out in hundreds of communities, with Americans of all races calling for police reform and an end to systemic racism.

## REDESIGN AMID CHAOS

As the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic unfolded, it was clear to both Breakthrough national and affiliate leaders that the only way to provide summer programming was virtual. With unparalleled commitment from staff members, support from the national office, advice from partnering school districts and local non-profits, and input from participants and families, affiliates modified and revamped curriculum to work virtually.

The operational plan for Summer 2020 required changes across the board: given public health and logistical limitations, some affiliates decided not to bring in new student cohorts. Most prioritized the recruitment of TFs with previous Breakthrough experience to fill out smaller TF teams. Instead of convening in-person for the summer experience, TFs were trained and participated from their homes situated across the country. By the end of summer, it was clear from attendance rates, satisfaction ratings, participant reports of knowledge gains, and increased comfort levels with online learning that Breakthrough's virtual learning experiences had not only supported student learning but had students and teachers alike celebrating significant accomplishments and forming lasting bonds. Ultimately, 5300 students were served by 710 TFs at 23 of the 24 affiliates virtually this past summer.<sup>12</sup>

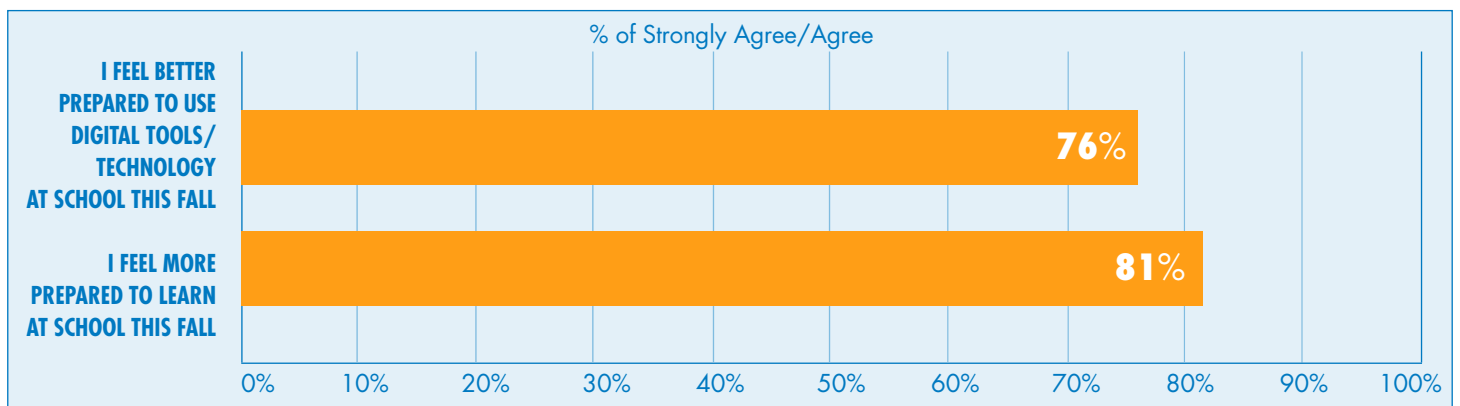
## POSITIVE OUTCOMES

Over the course of the summer, Breakthrough students and leaders consistently reported high levels of satisfaction and a strong sense of bonded community. “What surprised me,” said Carrie Miller, Breakthrough (BT) Pittsburgh’s ED, “was how intimate and connected we actually felt, even though we were virtual. I felt like I knew all of our teaching fellows, even though we had never met in person. And there was a certain sense of community that I did not expect to transfer virtually, and it absolutely did.” Michael Griffith, ED at BT Central Texas, agreed: “I was surprised at how quickly our teaching fellows and students were able to form a connection [...],” he said. “[It speaks to the] power of our students-teaching-students model. [...] That fundamental power wasn’t diluted just because it was in a virtual setting.”

### These sentiments tracked similarly to outcome data gathered at the end of the summer:

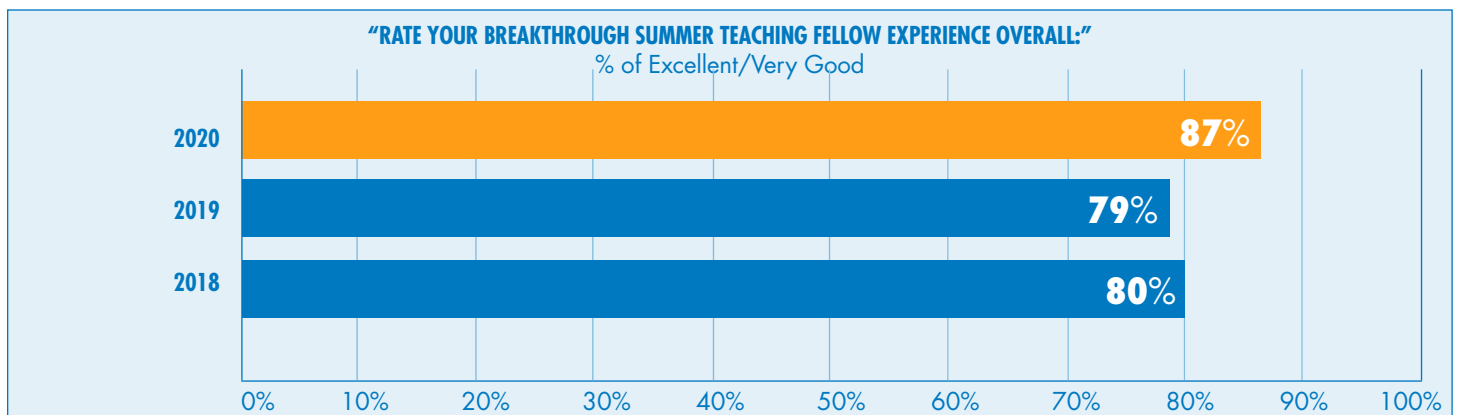
- 92 percent of students successfully completed the summer program<sup>13</sup>
- 81 percent of Breakthrough students felt more prepared to learn at school in the fall (Figure 2)
- 76 percent of Breakthrough students felt better prepared to use digital tools/technology at school in the fall (Figure 2)
- 87 percent of TFs reported that their 2020 experience was “very good” or “excellent,” higher than recent, in-person years (Figure 3)

FIGURE 2. STUDENT PREPAREDNESS TO USE DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY AND TO LEARN THIS FALL, 2020



Data source: 2020 Post-Summer Survey of Breakthrough Students.

FIGURE 3. TEACHING FELLOW RATINGS OF THEIR OVERALL EXPERIENCE, 2018 - 2020



Data sources: 2018, 2019, and 2020 Post-Summer Surveys of Breakthrough Teaching Fellows.

## STRATEGY 1: BELIEVE THAT ONLINE LEARNING IS POSSIBLE

Success in online learning starts with high expectations among program leaders and teachers — expectations that staff can be effective teaching in a virtual setting, and expectations that students will rise to the challenge, engage, and learn despite the new format.

### HOLD POSITIVE MINDSETS AND HIGH EXPECTATIONS

Breakthrough's culture is infused with positivity and high expectations. When asked for one word that describes Breakthrough, focus group participants commonly shared words such as "joyous," "fun," "exciting," and "amazing." Indeed, one of BT Twin Cities' mottos is "Positive us, not negative you."

**Breakthrough leaders embraced the challenge of moving their summer programming to a virtual setting with perseverance and positivity.** Joe Breedlove, ED at BT Fort Worth, noted: "The biggest thing [was] keeping everybody else's spirits as high as possible as we move into the virtual world because what we could not have is the same thing that the kids experienced coming out of their spring semester. We had to have something different."

A can-do attitude extends beyond programmatic adjustments. As **Breakthrough's model is one of high expectations and high support**, affiliates provide the necessary foundation for students to excel. "If there's anything that I love about Breakthrough it's how much the students are not underestimated. We value the student's input, we know what they're capable of," said returning TF Perla Ortiz from BT Central Texas.

One way that affiliates imbue the Breakthrough mindset is through **daily affirmations**. While affirmations vary by affiliate, they are all focused on social-emotional learning and a college-going mindset. Each affiliate has a daily, in-unison recitation ritual that engages the entire Breakthrough community. For example, BT Greater Philadelphia's affirmation is: "We are Breakthrough of Greater Philadelphia and we have high expectations. We commit ourselves to hard work, dedication, respect, fun, and above all, excellence in learning. We are Breakthrough of Greater Philadelphia. Wooo!"

*"Breakthrough is like a second home for me, it's a place where you feel welcomed. you are not judged, you are accepted and you find people who are like you. It is a place with warmth and it makes my summers full of joy."*

9TH GRADE STUDENT, BT Greater Boston

## STRATEGY 2: BE FLEXIBLE IN TRANSLATING PROGRAMS TO ONLINE FORMATS

Be creative in adjusting program structure and format while keeping program goals in mind. Possible changes may include altering time devoted to instruction, swapping or modifying staff roles, and modifying course content. Once programs are underway, solicit feedback from participants and adjust as needed along the way.

Breakthrough's virtual summer has been described by program directors as an **agile, living and breathing program**. In addition to Breakthrough staff spending enormous amounts of time at the start of summer planning for online learning, the program was regularly adjusted and adapted to the needs of students and teachers.

*"[We were] constantly asking, 'Are we doing this because this is how it worked in person or are we doing this because this is what makes sense right now?'"*

LIORA CHESSIN, Program Director at BT Birmingham

### REDESIGN PROGRAMMING WHILE STAYING TRUE TO PROGRAM GOALS

Breakthrough's detailed and rigorous in-person programming had to be reinvented for an online setting. Typically, this meant shortening academic programming (from full day to three-to-four hours a day), truncating the total length of the program (from six weeks to four weeks), modifying community-building events to work virtually, rethinking mechanisms for building teacher-student relationships, and finding ways to ensure technological access for all participants. Breakthrough also beefed up supports for participating families. It was clear from students' experiences with virtual schooling in the spring that the **number of hours of live, synchronous learning would need to be limited**. As such, Breakthrough student schedules curtailed the amount of consecutive live meeting time, often providing breaks after every 45 to 60 minutes.

*"I think the hardest part for all of us was cutting and cutting and cutting because you just can't do the same amount, can't cover the same amount of material, can't do all of the same activities online."*

DEB McLOUD, Executive Director at BT Manchester

While the in-person curriculum at Breakthrough typically includes four core subjects (i.e., math, science, social studies, English language arts), BT Miami chose a **project-based learning approach** for its virtual curriculum. At BT Central Texas, teachers used a singular project that had elements of all four subjects, and focused on the experience of enduring the pandemic, the social justice movement of Black Lives Matter, and immigrant students.

Alongside adjustments to core content were **adjustments to how staff were used in planning and course delivery**. BT Miami leveraged a large returning group of TFs by creating a committee in the spring to offer feedback on the curriculum before the summer commenced. They also relied on volunteers to act as teaching assistants in classes supporting technology needs as they arose. A few affiliates, like Breakthrough New York and Summerbridge San Francisco<sup>14</sup> shifted their ICs, typically reserved for mentoring and guiding TFs, to become lead instructors to capitalize on their prior experience in a virtual classroom from the spring. They then used TFs as teaching assistants, and scaffolded their experience to best support student learning.

### REASSESS AND ADJUST CONTINUALLY BASED ON FEEDBACK FROM STUDENTS AND STAFF

**All Breakthrough affiliates made adjustments**, big and small, as their summer program progressed. Certain adjustments related to the mix of synchronous and asynchronous lessons based on feedback they received from students and teachers. Other program-related changes, such as adding in large group time, were very common and successfully engaged students with one another.

Although program staff sometimes expressed frustration about continuous adjustments based on feedback, Rachel Banen, Program Manager at BT Twin Cities shared, “Teaching fellows still showed up every day, they showed gratitude towards each other to our staff, they did everything that they could for their students. I think they learned a lot, probably, maybe more than they even bargained for or that they thought they would.”



BREAKTHROUGH NEW ORLEANS

*“No one was an expert in what we were doing this summer, and so it allowed us to be flexible and allowed us to do a lot of trial and error.”*

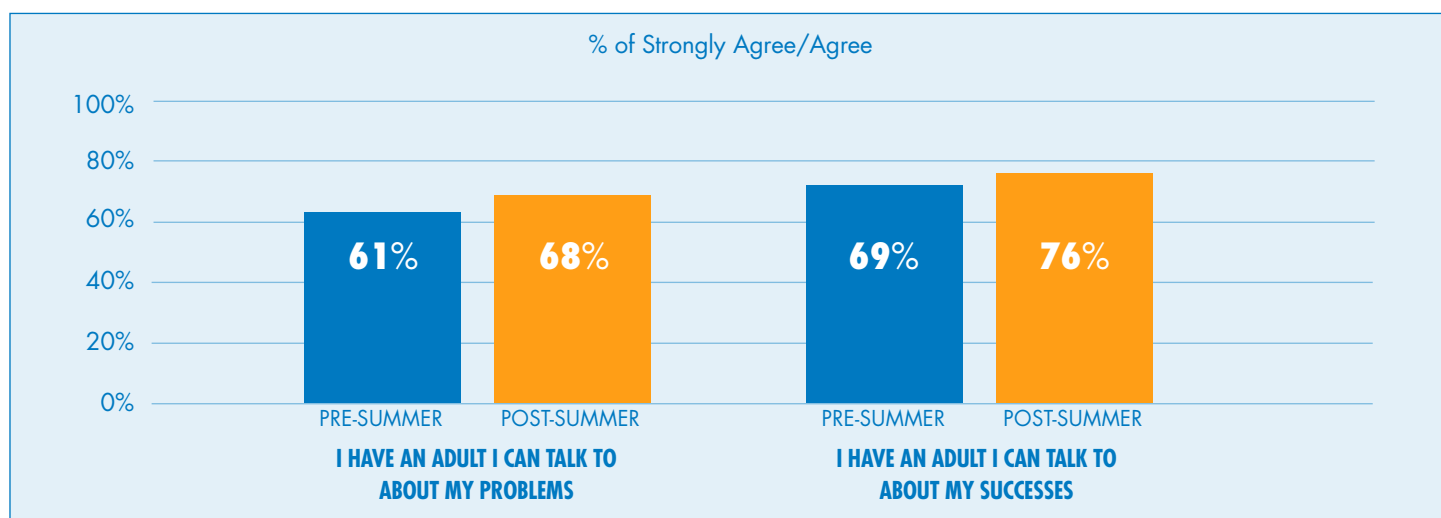
DRINE PAUL, Executive Director at BT Providence

### STRATEGY 3: CREATE SAFE SPACES IN SMALL AND LARGE GROUPS TO BUILD RELATIONSHIPS

Online communities are strengthened when students interact with other students and staff in groups ranging from one-on-one pairings and small groups through whole-community gatherings. Regardless of group size, cultivating safe spaces by giving students opportunities to authentically share anonymous and identified experiences contributes to students' and staff members' sense of belonging.

Students came into the summer feeling isolated, lonely, and eager to connect with other students. Many had poor virtual experiences in their home school communities, with limited interaction with friends or classmates. When asked on a pre-summer survey what they were most excited to do at Breakthrough at the start of the summer, more students responded "Connect with my Breakthrough community (classmates, friends, teachers)" (31%) than any other response. By prioritizing interpersonal connections, Breakthrough gave them that chance. By the end of the summer, **Breakthrough students were more likely to report having an adult at Breakthrough that they could talk to about their problems (+7 percentage points) or successes (+8 percentage points<sup>15</sup>) (Figure 4) than they did at their home schools.**

FIGURE 4. **STUDENT CONNECTEDNESS WITH ADULTS, 2020**



Data source: 2020 Pre- and Post-Summer Surveys of Breakthrough Students.

*"I've been ditched and left behind and when I first came to Breakthrough, I was immediately welcomed, so I see this program and the people that come here as a second family."*

8TH GRADE STUDENT, BT Miami

## CULTIVATE BELONGING THROUGH SMALL AND LARGE GROUP COMMUNITY-BUILDING OPPORTUNITIES

As is typical during any Breakthrough summer, and was also used during the virtual summer, students are placed into small advisories/mentee groups of five-to-seven students, led by a TF. **Students and teachers connect consistently, sometimes every day, to address both academic and social-emotional needs.**

Breakthrough affiliates increased the amount of time students and teachers spent in advisory this past summer; some affiliates, such as BT Central Texas, even moved to a one-on-one advisory model to amplify support for both students and families. BT Houston's ED Kathy Heinzerling said, "[Advisory] was critical in terms of their sense of belonging and their sense of having an adult that cared about them."

Another feature of the traditional BT model is the designation of subgroups called **"families," "Small Learning Communities" (SLCs), or "houses,"** depending on the affiliate. Each subgroup consists of multiple TFs and a small group of students. The subgroups foster community building, cross-grade interaction, and individualized support. Students and TFs represent their subgroups throughout the summer in various competitions, and spirit days by wearing their designated group colors. During the virtual summer, BT Santa Fe "families" attended "Breakfast with Breakthrough" each morning to receive social support and discuss topics such as study skills or the middle school transition to high school.

Unexpectedly, Breakthrough leadership discovered that **large online groups were critical to helping students feel connected to the larger Breakthrough family.** The large group meetings "made students feel a little bit more like, 'Oh, I get to be part of a bigger group and see more people,' which at first we thought would make them more uncomfortable, but it didn't," says BT Santa Fe's ED Allie Cooper. "It actually made them more comfortable." While in-person meetings were not possible for most affiliates, some affiliates, like BT Kent Denver, got creative and offered optional, socially-distanced Friday meet-ups in the park to help forge community connections.

To build community, all Breakthrough affiliates hold some form of an **All School Meeting (ASM), a program-wide assembly and pep rally where students and staff celebrate Breakthrough culture, and recognize accomplishments.** ASM meetings are a staple in any Breakthrough program, and were even more valued during this past summer. Common activities include announcements, the word of the day, recognition of outstanding students, family/SLC/house updates, skits, talent showcases, and contests. Spirit Sticks, awards for exemplifying the Breakthrough spirit, are also presented to students, typically through a skit, song, or special presentation by the student's advisor/mentor. During the virtual summer, some affiliates, such as BT San Francisco, held ASM every day, whereas others held ASM a few days a week. Affiliates either held live ASMs or recorded ASM videos ahead of time for students to watch together at a designated time of day.

## CREATE SAFE SPACES TO ALLOW FOR MEANINGFUL LEARNING

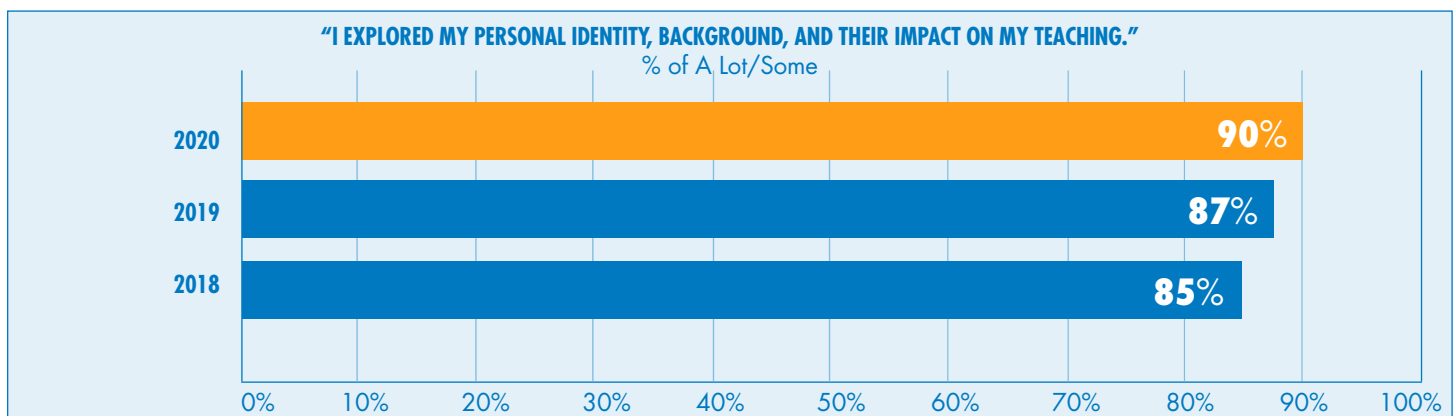
Breakthrough's model prioritizes developing connections with students as a way to maximize the opportunity to learn. One key aspect of relationship development is creating **"safe spaces," or comfort zones where students can be their authentic selves**. Safe learning environments are critical for students of color in particular, considering that U.S. classrooms traditionally reflect a white, Eurocentric curriculum and culture.<sup>16</sup> Michael Joseph, an IC at BT Central Texas shared: "We really stressed to [teachers], at least for the first week, really building rapport with the students, understanding who they are, what makes them tick, because you can go through all this content, and it doesn't mean anything to them if they don't think their teaching fellow cares about them. We had a lot of discussions that second week with our directors [...] and the TFs and everyone, and was like, 'We're going into these big topics. Are we creating a safe enough space for our students to really share their personal experiences or be vulnerable?' And that was a really big thing for us."

BT Central Texas incorporated a **Sensory Journal project** in their first week for students to analyze and reflect about themselves. Using the five senses, students were asked to pair each of the senses with a memory, presented in a personal narrative or story. The intent of this exercise was for students to document experiences that shaped their cultural identities in a deep way.

Other tools that TFs used to allow students to comfortably share their work in class were collaborative applications, such as Padlet, FlipGrid, NearPod, and Google Docs. These **online tools allowed students varying levels of anonymity when sharing their stories**, particularly if students were not ready to identify themselves but wanted to help others relate to their shared experiences.

In order for TFs to create these safe spaces for students, **teachers also needed to feel safe and supported in their own growth and teaching journey**. Many TFs, especially those who identify as persons of color or come from financially under-resourced backgrounds, share with Breakthrough students a need for validation and acceptance. Being part of the Breakthrough community, serving as teachers and leaders for students with whom they identify, strengthens TFs' sense of self. Indeed, by the end of summer 2020 programming, 90 percent of TFs reported that they explored their personal identity/background and its impact on their teaching "some" or "a lot" of the time — higher than in the past years during in-person summers (Figure 5).

FIGURE 5. **TEACHING FELLOW EXPLORATION OF IDENTITY AND IMPACT ON TEACHING, 2018 - 2020**



Data sources: 2018, 2019, and 2020 Post-Summer Surveys of Breakthrough Teaching Fellows.

*"Breakthrough is important to me because it's a safe space where I can share what I think and how I feel without being judged. I appreciate that I don't feel like I have to censor my voice or that I don't deserve to be heard."*

9TH GRADE STUDENT, BT Central Texas

**Affinity groups** within Breakthrough affiliate programs were another space for students and teachers to commune with others like them. BT Pittsburgh started a Black Voices Matter club, while BT Greater Boston created groups such as a Latinx, Muslim, Queer, Jewish, immigrant, and white women affinity groups, led by TFs.

These strategies worked: in focus groups, Breakthrough students reported feeling safe and welcomed in their classes during the virtual summer. Edward Rubio, an 8th grade student from Summerbridge San Francisco, shared the following: "I really liked the classroom environment and how everyone was kind and friendly and everyone was very supportive of each other. I liked the feeling of that. When I got to class, **I knew that I was in a safe environment so it made me want to keep coming to class.**"

### BUILD CONNECTIONS IN THE "OFF" TIMES

Moving Breakthrough to an online setting limited the opportunities for students and staff to engage with one another in "off" times, including between classes, at recess, and during meals. In an in-person Breakthrough summer, breakfast and lunch time brings the whole school community together, giving students the chance to lead cheers and bond together, as well as eat. The Breakthrough affiliate in Minneapolis (called LearningWorks at Blake) adapted their **virtual lunch time as an opt-in, one-hour discussion group for students and TFs**. TFs hosted one group a week on a topic of their choosing. By the second week, students stepped up to host lunch groups on topics they were excited about, creating an organic innovation that expanded time for relationship building outside of class.

**Open office hours** were another opportunity for unstructured conversation between students and staff. Although office hours are not unique to summer 2020, "The benefit to online learning was that I could meet more individualized with students," shared Georgena Williams, TF with BT Greater Philadelphia. "We would have math office hours, after Breakthrough hours. [...] We got to share not only math related content but also [got] to know them personally. I think that's just something that you don't get in an in-person setting because [you don't have that unstructured time] from 3:00 to 5:00."

Returning TF, Perla Ortiz, from BT Central Texas, reflected on a different way that her class used office hours: "We allowed the students, for asynchronous work, to come to our office hours and called it '**community work time.**' **They didn't necessarily have to talk to us, but we were there.** It felt like that asynchronous work was part of the classroom culture. I think that really helped the students go through with their projects, encouraged them to finish them. It was very helpful, just in case they had any questions, and just know that we were there for them."

## STRATEGY 4: PRIORITIZE CONNECTIONS WITH FAMILIES

The COVID-19 crisis drove the expansion of family involvement. Staff constantly communicated and surveyed to assess needs and provide support in areas that ranged from technology access to grocery cards. Families proved to be willing partners and allies in supporting student engagement, not just when students fell short of program expectations, but around student successes. Furthermore, offering parents remote gathering opportunities increased family participation rates in coffee chats and end-of-year celebrations.

Parents are typically eager for their students to have the kinds of opportunities that Breakthrough provides; their feelings were amplified during this virtual summer. They valued the structured, rigorous nature of the program, along with the opportunity for their child to connect with others. Breakthrough affiliates **communicated with families through phone calls, text messages, emails, and surveys at greater rates than in past years.** Connecting with families increased student success in the virtual program, and also gave affiliates the opportunity to provide families wraparound services when needed.

### ASK FOR REGULAR FEEDBACK FROM FAMILIES

In order to understand how students and families were faring physically, mentally, and emotionally after a difficult spring semester, almost every affiliate administered a **needs assessment survey** to its families before students began the summer. BT Atlanta's survey asked about access to computers and reliable internet, and checked how families and students were coping in areas such as work-life balance, job/income insecurity, access to food, and mental and physical health concerns. In addition to technology needs, BT San Francisco's survey also included a question on whether families needed financial assistance in the form of a gift card. When survey responses were missing or unclear, BT Providence staff took the extra step of calling families to better understand their technology challenges.

Breakthrough affiliates then **delivered materials and other support to families before the virtual program began.** BT Santa Fe mailed students a package that included a grocery gift card, while BT Houston delivered materials in person. "We gave out a ton of food cards to our families," shared Jarvis Lundy, PD at BT Houston. "We drove around the city for the whole week before and all during orientation handing out laptops [and] hotspots [...] to make sure our kids got what they needed."

The leadership team at BT Fort Worth held group phone calls with families and students to hear about their virtual learning experiences in the spring. Recognizing that schools had switched to virtual learning suddenly and under duress, Breakthrough staff wanted to identify lessons learned and incorporate them into their program.

Throughout the summer, affiliates continued to keep a pulse on family needs via surveys and phone calls. One affiliate, BT Silicon Valley, hosted town halls for families, as well as sessions to help families acclimate to technology. These connections allowed affiliates to support families in the moment and receive real-time feedback on what was or was not working, maximizing students' opportunities to engage with the program. This approach reflects recent research that shows how **communicating with parents about their children's progress — especially during virtual instruction — increases student success.**<sup>17</sup>

### SHARE HIGHLIGHTS AND CHALLENGES WITH FAMILIES IN A STUDENT-CENTERED WAY

BT affiliates used **email, text messages, and apps** (e.g., Remind) to communicate with families throughout the summer. Most program leaders communicated with families weekly, with some affiliates sending messages as many as three times a day, and holding weekly parent meetings.

Although some Breakthrough students opted out of the virtual summer, the vast majority of affiliates experienced high student attendance and completion rates. Measures of successful summer completion include attendance rates as high as 80 or 90 percent, depending on the affiliate. **Breakthrough as a whole saw a completion rate of 92 percent,**<sup>18</sup> a meaningful percentage considering some districts in the spring reported attendance rates around 66 percent.<sup>19</sup> Phone calls and text messages regarding daily attendance were common strategies employed by Breakthrough affiliates. One TF shared that these types of **calls were student-centered rather than punitive:** "If a student was gone, either a TF or a dean would call them up personally and be like, 'Hey, are you okay? Is there anything going on?' Not a, 'Why didn't you show up to class?', but 'Hey, is there anything we can help you with?'"

Connecting with parents about **homework completion** was another effective strategy. In a typical Breakthrough summer, program leaders use a high-touch, "restorative-justice" encounter to address missing homework or behavioral concerns. "Your Opportunity" (YO), for instance, is a session that students attend in lieu of their regular activities for one afternoon or period. In place of YO during the virtual summer, BT Fort Worth emailed both students and their parents if they had not submitted 50 percent of their homework. These emails led to staff supporting parents through parent trainings to teach them how to account for student homework, along with other strategies to support virtual learning.

Sharing student successes was another powerful way to connect and engage with families. **Teaching fellows were encouraged to regularly call or text their students' parents when their child was doing well.** Conswella Davis, a parent of a BT Birmingham student, particularly appreciated the validation: "I got a weekly text from one of [my daughter's] teachers, and I know that she's a good student, but as a parent you like to hear how your child is doing. It was always a good report, and I felt like it was genuine. They pointed out some key features that I recognize in her, that I see in her, that someone else saw it too, and shared it with me weekly. I really enjoyed that."

### OFFER REGULAR AND ACCESSIBLE FAMILY EVENTS

Affiliates also **offered regular opportunities for parents to engage with staff and other parents.** BT Santa Fe's parent coffee chats were held every Friday morning. "Parents were able to come in, talk to teachers by department and just express any concerns or any questions that they may have about how classes are going," explained Marvin Nogueda, Student Support Coordinator.

Traditional Breakthrough events, such as orientations and celebrations, were **better attended by parents during the virtual summer due to the convenience of the online format**. BT Manchester used Zoom for parent conferences, and found even greater attendance than in years past. Although some activities felt different during the virtual summer, staff, students, and parents remarked at how the Breakthrough spirit was still there. Sonia Rubio, parent of a Summerbridge San Francisco student, reflected on the end-of-program celebration she watched: "I think I was surprised this year [...] **Even if it was through a computer, they have the same energy, they have the same spirit**. To have the kids have that feeling that at the end of this summer, it was worth it to be in Breakthrough. [...] It was very nice, very special [...] even if they were at home."

The virtual platform also afforded family members an opportunity to "pop in" to a Breakthrough class, to observe, or be part of the experience. This resulted in connecting "families even more deeply to the experience," said Alex Serna, ED at BT San Juan Capistrano. Many Breakthrough leaders plan to incorporate more virtual opportunities even after the program returns in person, to keep these connection lines open to families.



## STRATEGY 5: DEFINE AND COMMUNICATE EXPECTATIONS FOR ONLINE PARTICIPATION

Online learning is new for students and teachers alike. Students benefit from technology training that assumes they have no prior experience in online learning. Teachers should be open to multiple ways to gauge student engagement, including active participation in chat boxes, homework completion, and participation in online games and competitions.

Breakthrough leadership's expectations around technology use shifted across the course of the summer. Staff assumed that Breakthrough students would come into the virtual summer holding some level of proficiency in online navigation, but it was quickly apparent that **students' comfort with computers and online platforms varied considerably**. Teaching fellows also needed to change their expectations on students' camera use during class, by finding **alternative ways to gauge class involvement**.

### SET CLEAR DIGITAL EXPECTATIONS AND NORMS THROUGH TECHNOLOGY TRAININGS

Although today's students are expected to be digital natives,<sup>20</sup> Breakthrough leaders found it necessary to **train students explicitly on how to use technology applications** for virtual learning. Allie Cooper, ED at BT Santa Fe explained, "Don't assume your students know technology just because they're young. Most of them know it worse than millennials or older generations and the reason for that is because they're used to phones, which work. Other devices don't work. They're not used to the ethos of, 'Oh, this doesn't work. Let me restart it.' [...] And so direct instruction about how to use technology and where things are online is super important."

Offering technology trainings proved invaluable to students. At BT San Juan Capistrano, an initial orientation focused on how the summer would be structured, and was followed by a second orientation that walked students through the technological aspects of the program, including how to log on, and the particulars of the platform.

Breakthrough students also benefited from having all of their **schedules and meeting links provided in a centralized online location**. Many affiliates learned that offering a single source of meeting links, rather than multiple links, reduced confusion for students and led to more efficient programming. By the end of the summer, 76 percent of Breakthrough students reported feeling better prepared to use digital technology at school in the fall.<sup>21</sup>

### RELY ON MULTIPLE INDICATIONS OF ONLINE STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

One expectation that affiliates struggled with was **camera use**. Affiliates' initial expectations were for students and teachers to use their cameras as often as possible to demonstrate attendance and engagement during classes and activities. Staff quickly learned that **keeping cameras on was challenging for some students**, as they had concerns about their physical appearance, or felt discomfort in showing their private home environments to others. Teaching fellows were especially concerned about their students' lack of visibility, as they found it difficult to make

connections with students if they could not see them. BT Greater Philadelphia's Program Director Michelle Palmer shared: "I didn't realize so many kids would not want to turn on their camera. We actually had a parent who didn't want his daughter on camera. [...] It didn't work as well as we thought, just thinking all the kids would just automatically keep their cameras on. [...] It's hard for the students. You know, one student said his hair wasn't cut. He didn't feel comfortable being on camera. [...] The teaching fellows are getting frustrated because they're like, 'I can't teach to a black screen,' [...] I would say [this was] our hardest thing to conquer this summer."

In response, Breakthrough staff **adjusted their expectations of camera use as the summer went on**. Returning TF from BT Greater Boston, Annie Shriver, shared that her program created flexible guidelines: "For some of them, especially in the context of this summer, that was really nice, that kids [who] were going through something really hard and didn't want to be on camera didn't have to, and they could participate and be involved without people looking at them. I think it helped bring down some of the anxiety and self-consciousness."

BT Manchester spoke with students about the value of teaching and learning when everyone can see and interact with one another, but found workarounds to camera usage, such as students turning their cameras on when answering a question. BT Providence leadership allowed students the option not to show themselves during large group meetings, as long as cameras were on when working directly with teachers or during small group classes.

BT Sacramento implemented **community hangouts with themes** — e.g., "fur friends" to show off their pets — to encourage students to visibly engage with one another. "We had whatever gave them a reason to hang out on the screen and actually have the screen on, so they could see each other. And then we'd give them a topic, and they'd just start talking," explained ED of BT Sacramento, Faith Galati.

In the end, many Breakthrough teachers noticed students engaging actively within the chat box while their cameras were off, participating in real-time apps like Kahoot!, turning in assignments late into the evening, and accessing course materials long after the program ended. These **alternative expressions of participation came to be seen as equally valid indications of successful engagement**.

*"Breakthrough is important to me because, it's helped me become more sociable. It's an AWESOME program where you learn new things but at the same time have a lot of fun :)"*

— 8TH GRADE STUDENT, BT Houston

## STRATEGY 6: IMMERSE STUDENTS IN REAL-WORLD CONTENT THAT IS RELEVANT AND FUN

Grounding learning in activities that are fun and relevant to students' lives fosters student engagement and empowerment. Social-justice curricula and real-world applications draw students into the classroom, and guiding students' understanding about their role in society gives students agency in the world around them.

Relevant topics and dynamic learning environments are foundational tenets of Breakthrough practice, both in person and online. The more that Breakthrough staff infused joy into activities, found ways to make students smile, and connected lessons to what was happening in the world, the deeper student engagement became.

### INFUSE SOCIAL JUSTICE AND REAL-WORLD EXAMPLES THROUGHOUT THE PROGRAM

BT Providence used a social justice curriculum to guide their lessons, while others infused social justice content ad hoc. Teaching fellows shared that **discussions around the current social environment helped engage students, no matter the subject or grade level.** "Utilizing the social justice movements from the summer helped a lot. Quite frankly, it helped engage all of our kids. And every one of my TFs used it on different varying levels. The little guys, the 6th graders, we used it differently than we would with the incoming freshmen," shared IC Anna Yarborough from BT New Orleans.

Holding culturally relevant conversations with students not only helped them better understand how they experienced their world, but also how they contribute to it. "That was a really big part of our overall focus, Black Lives Matter, COVID-19, and then more importantly, **student agency**," Michael Joseph, IC from BT Central Texas, shared. "So, what can they do? They see this stuff on the news, they see on social media, but sometimes I think there's this disconnect. [...] 'I'm a high schooler or middle schooler. I can't do anything. That's adult stuff.' But in reality, I think now, **they're saying that they can play a role in these things.**"

Non-instructional opportunities, such as **virtual field trips and guest speakers**, were other ways Breakthrough affiliates provided real-world context to their courses. Students went on virtual field trips to places that would have been impossible to visit in person.

*"We went on virtual field trips instead of actual field trips. I thought that we weren't going to do anything out of the ordinary. We went to the Bahamas and Egypt and it was pretty fun."*

TYRA DAVIS, 8th grade student at BT Birmingham

BT Greater Philadelphia set aside Wednesdays for field trips and guest speakers, with their first speaker from the World Health Organization. Another speaker was Victoria Wyeth, granddaughter of prominent artist Andrew Wyeth, who held a two-part presentation and gave an art assignment.

**Guest speakers who could speak to college and careers** were also successful. BT Pittsburgh invited a representative from Columbia University to speak with a small group of interested 7th through 10th graders. Every Thursday at BT Birmingham was "interest day" where students were exposed to people and information about various careers of interest. Students were surveyed in advance to determine their interests, and BT Birmingham's leadership built their speakers' schedule around those areas. To increase the value of the live events, students researched the speakers in advance and prepared questions they would ask ahead of time.

### KEEP LEARNING FUN AND JOYOUS

One key component to online student engagement was **making learning joyful**. "In the virtual classroom, it's important for it not to be a one-way experience with the teacher, talking at the students through the screen. [Teachers need] to make sure that it's a very conversational, highly engaged [classroom]. Kids using technology to present their ideas or their answers and experience, that makes it a lot of fun," shared Monique Shields, ED at BT Atlanta.

One successful way Breakthrough affiliates vary their approach to learning is through challenges, or **challenge-based learning**. BT Birmingham held a building a bridge and a songwriting challenge, while BT Fort Worth held virtual photo challenges. While voluntary, students readily participated in these activities. Some affiliates, such as BT Cincinnati, structured their whole summer program around independent academic challenges. Each week, students received their challenge materials on Monday morning, and submitted their completed challenge tasks on Wednesday afternoon. On Thursday, students attended a Virtual Student Meeting to showcase and celebrate what they learned. Weekly challenges were centered around a topic or theme, were appropriate for all grade levels served, addressed core subject areas, and took no more than three hours to complete.

**Spirit days** were another common way students and staff built community and infused fun during the program. Students and teachers at BT San Juan Capistrano pre-recorded short videos of a chant or cheer related to their college family, dressed up for pajama day or crazy hair day, and created a college poster with a Google document. On Spirit Day, students were involved in real-time quizzes through Kahoot!, and their posters and chant videos were presented to the whole community. Judges selected winning posters and presentations, and distributed awards for sportsmanship, best dressed, and most spirited.

**Teachers' energy and participation in special activities were critical** in cultivating the Breakthrough spirit. Sharita Davis, parent of a BT Atlanta student, described her appreciation for her daughter's teachers during spirit days: "They would have Wacky Wednesday, character day or something like that. It impressed me to see that the teachers were participating too. I saw the wacky day and I'm like 'Oh my God, these teachers look wackier than you all!'"

*"The importance of fun for building a functional online classroom really can't be overstated. All the games and any sort of incorporation of something that is whimsical or silly or fun helped us a lot with the creation of a culture and a place where students wanted to be."*

JORDAN BOSILJEVAC, Associate Director at BT Santa Fe

The conclusions from Breakthrough's summer experiences are clear: with focused planning, regular stakeholder input, and a willing and able staff, traditionally in-person activities can be transformed into meaningful virtual education. Connections can be made and communities can be built online, as long as expectations are appropriately tailored and staff remain optimistic. In addition to demonstrating that a hands-on, intensive, in-person summer experience can be modified for the virtual platform, findings from Breakthrough's summer 2020 programming have implications for the K-12 education community.

## TEACHERS AND EDUCATORS

Shifting to online instruction as an in-classroom teacher requires creativity, compassion, and courage. As teachers work to reconfigure their curricula for an online setting, it helps to think intentionally about building connections and community among students and between students and teachers. **Breakthrough teachers placed community-building at the heart of their redesigned curriculum, believing that relationships, fun, and meaningful content need to go hand in hand to deepen engagement and optimize learning.**

Recognizing that every class and grade level is different, and that summer programs are distinct from year-long schooling, strategies for cultivating community that teachers may find useful include the following:

- **Vary group size.** Meet with students individually, in small groups, and as a whole class. In addition to teacher delivery of content through lecture, slides, or presentation, find ways for students to interact. Quizzes, games, and sharing out opportunities all create space for engagement.
- **Create space for informal interactions.** Not all interactions need to be formal. Allowing students time to interact with peers freely and informally primes them socially, and gets them engaging online. Equally important is to create space for informal teacher-to-student interactions. Breakthrough teachers utilized open office hours and casual hang outs that gave students the option of connecting when desired.
- **Group students by interest.** Affinity groups are a great way to let students interact, grouping all the students interested in a certain career, artist, sport, identity, or social issue, for example. Such groups help students feel like they belong and can create safe spaces for students to be their authentic selves with others.
- **Utilize collaborative technology.** Breakthrough staff used a variety of tools to elicit student participation, including Padlet, NearPod, Flipgrid, and Google docs. Collaborative tools are a great way to encourage students to share their responses with varying levels of anonymity.
- **Make it meaningful.** Fuel students' interest in lessons by connecting them to what is going on in their lives and the world around them. Centering assignments around what is happening right now in the United States, regarding public health and racial justice, engages student interest. Consider project-based assignments that cut across multiple subject areas rather than single subject instruction.
- **Hold high expectations.** Have high expectations of your students and yourself. Students are more likely to accomplish whatever you expect; they look to you to set the tone.
- **Recognize multiple expressions of engagement.** Student engagement may manifest differently online than in-person, and may vary student to student. Teachers should allow students to demonstrate engagement in multiple ways, including participating in activities, games, or competitions, completing assignments, and commenting in the chat box, rather than making camera use the sole indicator.

- **Engage families continuously.** Parents can provide key insights into how students can be supported both at home and in the classroom. Parents also love hearing how their children are doing at school, and continuous back-and-forth contact best positions a student for success.
- **Incorporate feedback and be flexible.** Everyone learns together in an online classroom. Survey students and parents to see what is working (and what is not); be open to trying new approaches, changing structures, and exploring together to find strategies that work best for all involved.

### SCHOOL AND DISTRICT LEADERS

As the COVID-19 pandemic persists, many school districts have opted to continue with remote schooling for the remainder of 2020. While teachers interface directly with students, school administrators and leaders are important contributors to success. They set the tone, create structures, provide tools, and offer training and support to increase teachers' effectiveness. Lessons learned from Breakthrough Collaborative's Summer 2020 experiences for program leadership include the following:

- **Set high expectations and maintain positive attitudes.** Expect great things from your teachers, and communicate as such. Use positive language when addressing teachers, develop mottos that reinforce "We can do this!"
- **Be agile and flexible.** Be willing to change course when things aren't working. Gather feedback from teachers, parents, and students at the start of virtual learning and continue gathering feedback as you go, to see what is (or is not) working. Revise as needed.
- **Engage families.** Communicate with parents, conduct needs assessments to ascertain technology availability and limits, and survey families periodically to get feedback. Educators may experience greater parent participation in virtual events due to the convenience of online attendance.
- **Streamline platforms.** Where possible, limit the number of links that students need to access their coursework and meetings.
- **Provide technology support.** Teachers and students alike may need assistance learning new technologies. Where appropriate, consider having aides who can help teachers operate large group meetings, trouble-shoot student issues, or monitor chat rooms. Train, retrain, and train again. Weave small "micro-lessons" into staff meetings, rather than overwhelming staff with multi-hour training sessions.
- **Build community.** Provide emotional and social support for your teachers, in addition to technological support. Recognize that you no longer have the informal community building that usually takes place in an in-person setting through hallway greetings and conversations in the teachers' lounge. Intentionally create space for informal interactions among teachers and between teachers and administrators. Weave team-building exercises or games into staff meetings. Strong teacher-to-teacher connections will translate to stronger student connections and strengthen both the community and the learning experience.

- <sup>1</sup> *Data source:* National Student Clearinghouse.
- <sup>2</sup> *Data source:* ["Digest of Education Statistics,"](#) National Center for Education Statistics, 2017.
- <sup>3</sup> *Data source:* 2017 Alumni Survey.
- <sup>4</sup> One affiliate elected not to provide instruction in summer 2020.
- <sup>5</sup> This definition of successful online engagement aligns with that offered by Nathaniel Louwrens and Maggie Hartnett, ["Student and Teacher Perceptions of Online Student Engagement in an Online Middle School,"](#) Journal of Open, Flexible, and Distance Learning, 19(1), pp. 27-43.
- <sup>6</sup> Matt Barnum and Claire Bryan, ["America's Great Remote-Learning Experience: What Surveys of Teachers and Parents Tell Us About How It Went,"](#) ChalkBeat, June 26, 2020.
- <sup>7</sup> Rakesh Kochar, ["Unemployment Rose Higher in Three Months of COVID-19 Than It Did In Two Years of the Great Recession,"](#) Pew Research Center, June 11, 2020.
- <sup>8</sup> Christina Samuels, ["Will Learning Gaps Deepen as Schools Stay Closed?"](#) Education Week, September 24, 2020.
- <sup>9</sup> Emily Vogels, ["59% of U.S. Parents with Lower Incomes Say Their Child May Face Digital Obstacles in Schoolwork,"](#) Pew Research Center, September 10, 2020.
- <sup>10</sup> Taylor Nicole Rogers, ["Wealthy Parents are Paying to Have Their Kids Homeschooled by Professionals for Up to 5 Hours a Day, and it Shows How the Pandemic is Widening the Gaps in America's Education System,"](#) Business Insider, May 27, 2020.
- <sup>11</sup> Emma Dorn, Bryan Hancock, Jimmy Sarakatsannis, and Ellen Viruleg, ["COVID-19 and Student Learning in the United States: The Hurt Could Last a Lifetime,"](#) McKinsey & Company, June 2020.
- <sup>12</sup> One affiliate elected not to provide instruction in summer 2020. Total number of students served includes middle, high, and post-high school students.
- <sup>13</sup> *Data source:* 2020 Affiliate Survey. While regular attendance is a requirement of students' commitment to the program, metrics to determine "successful completion" of the program vary by affiliate. See Appendix I for more information.
- <sup>14</sup> Summerbridge San Francisco is one of two Breakthrough affiliates in San Francisco.
- <sup>15</sup> Difference is due to rounding.
- <sup>16</sup> Lisa Delpit, ["Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom,"](#) The New Press, 2006.
- <sup>17</sup> Nancy Hill and Latoya Gayle, ["Engaging Parents and Families to Support the Recovery of Districts and Schools,"](#) EdResearch for Recovery, September 2020.
- <sup>18</sup> *Data source:* 2020 Affiliate Survey. See Appendix I for more information.
- <sup>19</sup> Dana Goldstein, Adam Popescu and Nikole Hannah-Jones, ["As School Moves On, Many Students Stay Logged Out,"](#) New York Times, April 8, 2020.
- <sup>20</sup> Digital native is a term coined by Marc Prensky, ["Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants,"](#) On the Horizon, 9 no.5, October 2001.
- <sup>21</sup> *Data source:* 2020 Student Post-Summer Survey.

This report draws on multiple data sources, including surveys, interviews, focus groups, and affiliate program documents and reports. Below we outline each data source, the number of respondents, and topics covered by the data collection instruments and protocols.

## SURVEYS

Teaching fellows, students, and affiliate leaders were surveyed to describe their experiences and the ways in which they perceived their Breakthrough experience. Survey data were cleaned and analyzed to provide population trends and overall measures of participant perceptions of outcomes. Margins of error for teaching fellow and student surveys range from  $\pm 1.1$  to 1.4 percent at a 95 percent confidence interval.

| Data Source                                         | Population Size                                   | Survey Respondent Size                                                      | Response Rates                                           | Topics Covered                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|-----------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Post-Surveys</b> of Teaching Fellows (2018-2020) | 2020: 710<br>2019: 1,068<br>2018: 1,024           | 2020: 650<br>2019: 881<br>2018: 871                                         | 2020: <b>92%</b><br>2019: <b>82%</b><br>2018: <b>85%</b> | Lesson planning skills and abilities, student engagement, learning personal identity and its impact on teaching, likelihood of teaching, likelihood of child advocacy, perceptions of program leadership, overall experience |
| <b>Pre-Summer Surveys</b> of Students (2020)        | 5,195 Students at 23 affiliates from grades 5-12. | 3,196 Students from 22 affiliates                                           | <b>62%</b>                                               | Connections to adults, feelings of belonging, technology access, preparation for the fall, goals for the summer                                                                                                              |
| <b>Post-Summer</b> Surveys of Students (2020)       | 5,195 Students at 23 affiliates from grades 5-12. | 2,489 Students from 23 affiliates                                           | <b>48%</b>                                               | Connections to adults, preparation for the fall, college readiness                                                                                                                                                           |
| <b>Affiliate Survey</b> (2020)                      | 23 Affiliates                                     | 22 Affiliates had completed the survey at the time of this report's writing | <b>96%</b>                                               | Home school/district spring and fall schedules, summer schedule, grades served, curriculum, support                                                                                                                          |

## INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS

In addition to surveying all teaching fellows and students, interviews and focus groups were conducted in August and September 2020 to provide in-depth information about program leadership and qualitative data on student and family experiences. Transcripts were coded to reveal themes and provide quotations to illustrate key points.

| Data Source                                                                          | Number of Respondents                                                                                                                      | Topics Covered                                                                                                                     |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Interviews</b> with Executive Directors (August/September 2020)                   | 19 Executive Directors,<br>19 of 23 affiliates<br>83% representation                                                                       | Decision-making, initial concerns and assumptions, support from national office, program successes and challenges, lessons learned |
| <b>Interviews</b> with Program Directors (August/September 2020)                     | 30 Program Directors,<br>20 of 23 affiliates<br>87% representation                                                                         | Pre-summer planning, initial concerns and assumptions, program successes and challenges, lessons learned                           |
| <b>Focus Groups</b> with Students and Parents (September 2020)                       | Session 1: 3 Students, 3 Parents<br>Session 2: 4 Students, 4 Parents<br><br>6 of 23 affiliates represented                                 | Program successes and challenges, Breakthrough culture, relationships, outcomes                                                    |
| <b>Focus Groups</b> with Teaching Fellows and Instructional Coaches (September 2020) | Session 1: 2 Teaching Fellows<br>Session 2: 2 Teaching Fellows<br>Session 3: 2 Instructional Coaches<br><br>5 of 23 affiliates represented | Program successes and challenges, Breakthrough culture, relationships, outcomes                                                    |

## PROGRAM COMPLETION

Students are required to attend regularly as part of their commitment to the Breakthrough program. Successful completion of the summer program is determined by each affiliate, but commonly includes measures of attendance, such as 80 percent attendance throughout the summer. Other indicators of successful completion may include activities, such as the completion of a final project.

## DATA LIMITATIONS

This study is descriptive in nature, and relies on participant perceptions of the value of their Breakthrough experiences. Measurement of outcomes is limited to participant self-report and does not include any non-program comparison group. Student pre- and post-survey results are reported in the overall aggregate; data were not collected in a manner that allowed for pre/post matching of responses.

## AFFILIATES

### Breakthrough Atlanta

Executive Director: Monique Shields

### Breakthrough Birmingham

Executive Director: Mariohn Michel

### Breakthrough Central Texas

Executive Director: Michael Griffith

### Breakthrough Greater Boston

Executive Director: Elissa Spelman

### Breakthrough Cincinnati

Executive Director: Julie Witten

### Breakthrough Kent Denver

Executive Director: Sarah Dutcher

### Breakthrough Fort Worth

Executive Director: Joe Breedlove

### Breakthrough Houston

Executive Director: Kathy Heinzerling

### Breakthrough Manchester

Executive Director: Deb McCloud

### Breakthrough Miami

Executive Director: Lori-Ann Cox

### LearningWorks at Blake (Minneapolis)

Executive Director: Tricia Crossman

### Breakthrough New Orleans

Interim Executive Director:  
Tina Totorico

### Breakthrough New York

Executive Director: Beth Onofry

### Breakthrough at Norfolk Academy\*

Executive Director: Jennifer Rodgers

### Breakthrough of Greater Philadelphia

Director of Program: Michelle Palmer

### Breakthrough Pittsburgh

Executive Director: Carrie Miller

### Breakthrough Providence

Executive Director: Drine Paul

### Breakthrough Sacramento

Executive Director: Faith Galati

### Breakthrough San Francisco

Executive Director: Andy Shin

### Summerbridge San Francisco

Executive Director: Dara Northcroft

### Breakthrough Silicon Valley

Executive Director: John Hiester

### Breakthrough San Juan Capistrano

Executive Director: Alex Serna

### Breakthrough Santa Fe

Executive Director: Allie Cooper

### Breakthrough Twin Cities

Executive Director: Josh Reimnitz

## NATIONAL STAFF

JONATHAN APPLEBY

Director of Recruitment

KYLE BOBRICK

National Communications Manager

IEESHA MCKINZIE COLLINS

Managing Director of External Relations

CLAIRE CONTONENTE

Administrative Associate

JEE DEOGRACIAS

Director of Research & Evaluation

LEAH EHINGER

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PHYLLIS ELICK

Director of High School & College  
Bound Programming

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SAM LONG

Managing Director of Technology

RACHEL MARTINEZ DE CANADA

Chief People & Program Officer

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National Grants Manager

NICOLE NOGA

Managing Director of Operations

JACOB SPEEDY

Salesforce Platform Manager

ELISSA VANAUER

Chief Executive Officer

MEREDITH ZACKEY

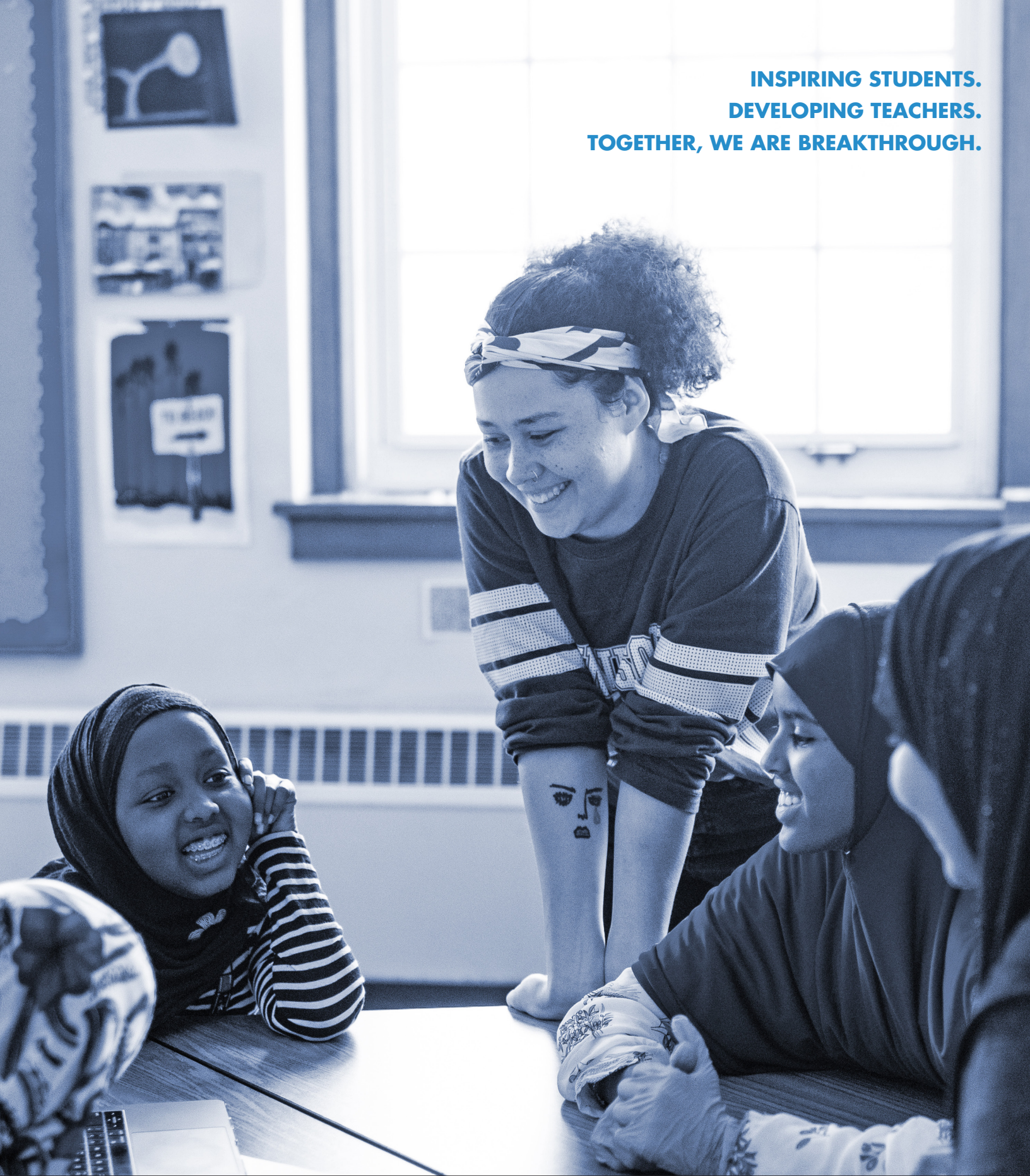
Senior Director of Programs

\*no program offered during summer 2020

## CREDITS:

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INSPIRING STUDENTS.  
DEVELOPING TEACHERS.  
TOGETHER, WE ARE BREAKTHROUGH.



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